

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 211 863

CG 015 515

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TITLE Ego Identity Development in Females: Focus on Adolescent Foreclosure.
PUB DATE Mar 81
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Association for Women in Psychology (8th, Boston, MA, March 5-8, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescent Development; Adolescents; Developmental Stages; *Developmental Tasks; *Females; Feminism; Parent Child Relationship; Parent Role; *Personality Development; *Role Models; *Self Concept; Social Influences; State of the Art Reviews

ABSTRACT

Erikson marked adolescence for the prime developmental task of identity achievement. An examination of 31 mothers, aged 25 to 45, revealed that foreclosure of identity development was the norm for this sample in adolescence and that, for those who had achieved identity, the subsequent status change was related to the liberating influences of feminism. Positive correlations were found between the identity achievement of the sample mothers and the maturity of their concepts and understanding of the child, the parent-child relationships, and the parental role. Lacking role models, encouragement, and identification by parents, educators, and peers, girls engage less than boys in courses in the sciences and math. Curriculum and counseling interventions are needed to inhibit early foreclosure for adolescent females. Parents, educators, and adolescents themselves can work to avoid foreclosure of females' identity development through parent workshops and programs, staff sensitization to their own attitudes and behaviors toward women's roles, and role modeling. Counseling interventions currently aimed at "adjustment" might be addressed to promoting life decision-making and helping females keep their options open during crucial preadolescent and early adolescent periods. (Author/NRB)

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EGO IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN FEMALES:
FOCUS ON ADOLESCENT FORECLOSURE

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Ten years ago 71 percent of all women in the United States were not members of the work force; 11 percent worked part time and 18 percent full time. In 1980 approximately 50 percent were employed outside the home, including greatly increased numbers of mothers of young children. Competing in the marketplace while managing household and familial responsibilities is now commonplace in the U.S. Despite this and other striking changes in women's lives in the past two decades, women continue to work for far less and to work far more than do males. On the job they earn only 59¢ on the average for every \$1 men earn, and in the home "a woman's work is never done." Studies on depression in women (Nickerson, 1979) add to this negative picture.

Considering these disparities it is essential to focus on female adolescence, since it is at this life stage that Erikson (1963) placed the major psychosocial developmental task of identity achievement. The "achieved" individual after a long period of "crisis." i.e., active exploration of life's alternatives, becomes committed to a path and an ideology, a set of personal values and beliefs. The "foreclosed" person, on the other hand, becomes committed to a path and an ideology, a set of personal values and beliefs, espoused by parents and societally accepted, without undergoing the length and arduous search.

Recent research at Boston University (Partoll, 1980) supported a considerable body of earlier research studies (Beck, 1967; Epstein,

1973; Gump, 1972; Nickerson & Williams, 1975; Schenkel, 1972; Stein & Bailey, 1973) on the inhibiting and even deleterious influence of societally accepted roles for women. My sample involved 31 mothers, ages 25 to 45, still actively engaged in child rearing. Forty-five percent of the sample women had not achieved optimal identity development, i.e., identity achievement, and of the 55% who had, it was clear that very few had completed the task in the adolescent years.

The problem for females appears not just one of somewhat delayed identity achievement; rather it is one of nonachievement of identity for many.

In Erikson's schema the identity task preceded the psychosocial tasks of intimacy and generativity, which can briefly be translated as the capacity to form interdependent relationships and to function in a productive, recreative way for the future of society. Successful resolution of the identity task prepares one for future tasks (Erikson, 1968).

In my research there were, as predicted, positive correlations between the identity achievement of the sample mothers and the maturity of their concepts and understanding of the child, the parent-child relationships, and the parental role.

However, the study also revealed that foreclosure of identity development was the norm for the sample population in adolescence and that, for those now identity achieved, the subsequent status change was related to the liberating influences of feminism. (The women in their 30's and 40's revealed quite recent change of status.)

According to Erikson's scheme, without having arrived at a firm sense of one's self-identity and a resolution of questions

of what one believes and who one will be, an individual cannot optimally deal with the subsequent developmental tasks of life (Erikson, 1968).

Stein & Bailey (1973) found that there was no path a female can take that is as relatively conflict-free and as highly rewarded as occupational achievement is for a male. They hypothesized that interactional social skills are a central area of achievement for women. Integrating achievement striving and femininity reduces conflict for women, but is a physically and psychologically draining way to live.

Many studies indicate that girls are generally reinforced by both male and female parents for their expressiveness, nurturance, and not for goal-directness, autonomy, instrumentality, as are boy children. Girls are protected more; parents find aggression more normal, and tolerate it more, in boys. Lefcourt (1976) pointed to the research that such polarities may be locking girls into overdependence and preparing them for lives of relative lack of autonomy. Nickerson's studies (1979) of learned helplessness and depression in women address such issues.

Matteson in Adolescence Today (1975) focused on the powerful effectiveness of myths of masculinity and femininity, the devaluation of women by both men and women, and the increasing valuing of the male role for women themselves. He says that unwittingly mothers pass on their unresolved conflicts to sons and daughters, teaching them to devalue women. Few would argue with Matteson that women continue to be trivialized.

But what of the Managerial Woman (1977)? These women simply were not indoctrinated to traditional female sex roles in childhood

years, nor were they inhibited from investing too much in vocational aspirations.

With rare exceptions the women in my research sample (Partoll, 1980) described themselves as being channeled into traditional skill fields (i.e., the nurturant and supportive secretary, nurse, or teacher) regarded by parents and teachers as useful for their later "major" roles in marriage and motherhood. About one-fourth of them spoke of outright opposition by parents and teachers of aspirations toward less traditional and/or male-dominated fields.

Nearly half of the sample subjects were exposed to literature or courses during the conscious-raising and awareness phase of the 1970's, which apparently heightened their insight and their motivation. Their retrospective reports were descriptive of movement from earlier "foreclosed" tracks on toward self-realization.

The 1980's, however, demands a fresh lens on female development, that is a reorientation from the reactive to a proactive scenario. It becomes critical that parents not play out their scripts with their young daughters regarding identity development, i.e., not giving messages of female foreclosure even subliminally.

Research cited by Lefcourt (1977) reported that girls underestimate their ability early, have lower expectancies than boys, which limits their motivation and efforts.

Douvan & Adelson(1966) pointed out that adolescent girls have far less realistic and less defined goals for their adult lives than males. In my daily work with female adolescents in an educational setting this still appears to be quite evident.

Ferguson & Maccoby (1966) found that fifth grade females of high spatial ability had low sex role acceptance, and Lipman-Blumen

(1972) stated that by college years the women with non-traditional sex role concepts had higher educational aspirations.

School personnel are believed to be more likely to take note of and to encourage male students in the sciences and mathematics than female students (Fox & Richmond, 1979); as early as seventh grade boys begin to move ahead of girls of equally high potential in career interests and abilities.

Lacking role models, encouragement and identification by parents, educators, and peers for the most part, girls engage far less than boys in courses in the sciences and math (Casserly, 1975).

Only two of the mothers of my research were able to identify any "significant other" woman in their lives who influenced their career aspirations, beyond standard "female" ones, or who inspired them with a sense of female prestige or leadership. The two exceptions to this dearth of female role models occurred in the cases of those who had attended prestigious all-women universities. Descriptive data gathered from 117 women's colleges in the United States (1980 survey conducted by the Women's College Coalition of Washington, D.C.) indicates that women at these colleges have higher aspirations than women in co-ed colleges, that women in women's colleges are more than twice as likely to elect nontraditional majors, and that they have a far greater number of female role models among the faculty. The study suggest that responsive patterns and flexibility are showing up earliest in women's colleges.

Shifting the Scenario

A triple-pronged early approach to reorientation interventions is now in order. Parent groups starting when the children are young should change from problem and behavior-centered focus to enhancing

adult skills to deal with stereotypic parent behavior differences toward their male and female children.

Educators, counselors, and psychologists should be sensitized to their own attitudes and subtle behaviors toward women's roles. It is vital to involve staff at the elementary level in order to avoid early tuning out and tuning off of the wide range of life possibilities for girls as well as for boys.

Educator and psychological services will need to learn how best to communicate early to parents their daughters' enlarged potential, and how parents can give recognition rather than to discount such broadened potential horizons.

Children at the elementary grade level can more readily than older students be exposed to demystification of formerly unattainable goals for females and awareness of human potential without sex-role biases.

Parents, educators, and adolescents, too, can control to a far greater extent than at present the messages in textbooks, television, the theatre, and advertising media, by screening for sex bias, by purchasing discriminately, and by informing vendors of their specific displeasures. The power of the public is sadly underutilized.

High school staff members, both female and male, can act as mentors to girls who show promise in their subject areas, whether these are traditional for women or not. Parents should actively be stimulated to encourage their daughters; parents can be informed through literature and workshops.

A parent program proposed for junior high school parents would seem to have far greater impact than one launched at high school level.

Exploring the historic reasons that some female high school students become disengaged from the academic process is of particular salience. Long and intensive personal observation of girls from preschool through high school years has left me with the distinct

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impression that many girls who in sixth grade unexpectedly begin to demonstrate anger and hostility, by high school years are seen as poorly-functioning, depressed, and seriously underachieving. One might conjecture that pubescent females start to recognize lack of status and that they are not going anywhere, and that by high school a sense of futility has developed.

Jung (1966) stated that the ego of the individual who adjusts to society is resistant to the unconscious, because rebellious and maladaptive impulses aggregate there. Intervention currently aimed in the schools at "school adjustment" might better address itself to promoting life decisions and helping young females to keep their options open at the crucial period before depression, acting out, and "school refusal" appear to set in.

Programming Creatively

A survey of efforts in one large suburban U.S. high school provides several potential intervention models. Courses in Psychology of Women and Women's Issues in Literature are attracting more and more students, and what is more striking, and increasingly diverse socioeconomic range.

Another program which fosters identity development is an alternative school program within the regular school structure; this program is sought out by a greater proportion of females each year. This year's enrollment has been 75% females. The program offers non-traditional courses, opportunities to explore one's creativity and individuality, the protection of a small community of supportive peers and staff, and decision-making in regard to structure and governing regulations for the program. The students are of varying backgrounds and home situations and are in large part university bound.

A number of nonachieving and nonaffiliating adolescents who

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have left school find a renewed opportunity for completing high school credit in an alternative program outside the regular school. Students, predominantly female in my experience, attend classes beginning in late afternoon while holding jobs earlier in the day. They appear to be striving to find themselves, both vocationally and ideationally, and undergoing considerable turmoil in the process; this process closely describes the path toward identity achievement according to Erikson's theory (1968).

In the larger general school the science and mathematics departments provide numerous female models. More than half the math staff and fifty percent of the science, social studies, and occupation staffs are female.

One particularly interesting parents group includes single mothers of able but underachieving female adolescents. The leader found great need for attitude exploration among the mothers and for awareness of parent-child dynamics to allow for individuation and identity development appropriate to the age of the daughters.

Another heavily subscribed parent group included single mothers and fathers of adolescents. Issues related to rebelliousness and acting out behavior of the girls was clearly a top priority issue. Many of the parents spoke of the reawakening of their own unresolved adolescent issues as creating interference as they dealt with their children.

Using a New Lens

If a recent trip to a local bookstore can be taken as indicative of heightened interest in female development, we should be encouraged. I share with you several titles: Women on their Way (1979); Turning Points (1979); Masculine/Feminine or Human (1974); Be a Mother and More: Career and Life Planning for Young Women (1980); I Can Be Any-

thing: Careers and Colleges for Young Women (1978).

It will take strenuous and constant effort to translate these titles into reality. Women will need help to be protected, as Goodman (1979) points out, from carrying in their heads guilt for not fulfilling old and new roles in superwomen fashion and from the new frustrations created by the new freedoms.

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